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Harmonie en onenigheid in informele discussies.

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Summary in English

This study investigates lines of topical development in informal discussions, in harmonic as well as in controversial episodes. It is an exploratory investigation, in which discussion materials from diverse contexts are analysed and compared in their topical structure.

Chapter 1

Chapter 1 starts with a description of the position of this study within the fields of argumentation theory, of conversation and discourse analysis, and of applied linguistic research on argumentation. Then the nature of the research problems is expounded, and the methodological position from which the research is conducted. I argue for an exploratory model of research, pointing to the underresearched character of the field and the complexity of the research object: topical development. The used research procedures, namely conceptual analysis, exemplary analysis of discussion fragments and corpus analysis, are set out in some detail.

The chapter further contains a conceptual exploration of the notion of informal discussion. Different types of discussions are summed up, with reference to the dimensions of "topic", "role structure", internal "agenda", "goals" and "integrity" of the discussion as a speech event. A discussion is called "informal" when the content of the parameters just mentioned is little determined in advance. The most informal discussion has no sharply defined goal, topic, role structure and agenda, and a low level of integrity. The chapter concludes with a characterization of the sorts of talk that are dealt with in this study:

- organized discussions by groups of five secondary school pupils on political subjects, such as the policy with regard to illegal immigrants or the re-introduction of capital punishment; although one of the participants acts as a chairman, there is no obligation to take a decision or formulate a collective viewpoint
- table conversations among (three to five) close friends
- discussions about marital problems among spouses, which were held in the context of a psychological investigation; the instruction was to discuss problems and, if possible, find solutions.

Chapter 2

Chapter 2 deals mainly with the characterization of the notion of topic in terms of discourse coherence.

Firstly, two current versions of the notion of discourse topic are analyzed, the first version being a pragmatically oriented definition and the second version using referential terms. The main result of the first analysis is that topics are a relevant category in contexts of utterance types that do not ask for specific reactions in the way questions or invitations do. The main result of the second analysis is that it seems nearly impossible to speak about topics without taken into account pragmatic considerations.

The chapter now proceeds with a review of typologies of forms of discourse coherence. This review leads to the conclusion that most typologies fail to distinguish between referential, propositional-semantic and pragmatic levels of description. This last level is defined as concerning relations between the goals of the relevant speech acts. Partly building on fruitful elements in the reviewed typologies, a typology of five pragmatic coherence forms is proposed: sequence relations, auxiliary relations, evaluation relations, addition relations and occasion relations. The last category refers to the phenomenon that an element from a line of speech action is taken up and 'occasions' a new line of action.

After some further elaborations of the proposal it has become possible to circumscribe the discourse contexts in the description of which the topic-notion is relevant: the context of auxiliaries, evaluations and additions that are not bound by overarching speech act patterns.

The chapter concludes with the introduction of the notion of interaction type, which term was originally coined by Jefferson and Lee (1981) to describe forms of global structure that "emerged" in conversations about troubles. By their "spontaneous" emergence and the absence of a predefined role structure, interaction types are to be distinguished from "supersequences" as Problem-Solution in institutional discourse.

Chapter 3

3.1

Chapter 3 is dedicated to the exemplary analysis of harmonic episodes in discussions between secondary school pupils and in table conversations among close friends.

In the discussions several types of episodes are described, such as "jointly answering a topic question", "elaborating on an utterance that mentions a problem" and "discussing a general proposal". These characterizations indicate activity types that are carried out jointly by the participants. They all originate in a topical statement; however, the topical projections differ in specificity. Topic questions, which are found rather little in these discussions, project a clear topical domain, whereas problem-utterances and general proposals, found considerably more, can be topicalized from diverse angles. Problem utterances for instance can be reacted to with statements about causes, about consequences, about similar problems elsewhere, about possible solutions and about courses of action that are currently taken by authorities with regard to the problem.

The structure of these episodes is characterized by a general orientation on agreement. An utterance is generally not responded to by a claim of agreement (like "that's my opinion too"), but followed by a new utterance which is builded on elements of the former utterance. In this way, a participant "demonstrates" at the same time his agreement and his understanding of the former utterance, and his taking an active part in the discussion.

Agreement is also maintained by the way possible sources of disagreement are treated. One tends to select those elements from former utterance for 'uptake' that one can agree to, and to neglect others. When an objection is voiced to a proposal this is immediately affirmed as a 'necessary consideration' to be taken into account, and so forth.

Unmarked shifts of topic are systematically occurring in these discussions. Most of these shifts operate by 'using' a former utterance in a somewhat different context than the one it comes from. For instance, when discussing the question why immigrants generally do not want to go back to their 'homeland', one can take up an utterance about their motives for staying and use it to support the statement that sending them back would be immoral - which statement is topicalized further by other supports. It will further be clear that utterances with a 'broad' topicalizing potential as problem-statements (see above) by their nature encourage gradual, step-by-step shifts in topic by way of additional statements, contributing to 'the general picture'.

Precisely because of their gradual character, these shifts can not be called occasions - rather they exemplify additions which 'bend' the line of topical development a bit. Furthermore, the different topics can be seen as connected in a general "topical framework", in this case the framework "political problems and their possible solutions". A final observation is that it seems the essence of exploratory discussion that shifts like these occur systematically.

3.2

The second part of chapter 3 deals with the topical structure of conversations in general, and table conversations among close friends in particular. In a literature review on topic shifts in conversation, several types of shift are distinguished. On the one hand there are shifts in which the new topic introduction claims coherence on a higher level, in the sense that it contributes, together with the utterances on the former topic, to a "supertopic". On the other hand there are shifts in which, although the topics are referentially connected, it is clear that a new line of action is started. It is further made clear that, in order to make this distinction, an analysis is needed of the pragmatic coherence forms in the fragment.

What follows next is an exploration in the topical structure of table conversations. Firstly, the central position of "remarks" as a source for topics is set out. A remark is a declarative utterance which, in contrast to the problem-statements that we encountered in discussions, can be topicalized in any direction. A typical conversational opening remark is the "news announcement", but in the further development of topics that stem from news announcements, remarks with all kinds of content play a central role. Secondly, different topics in conversation generally turn out to be connected purely referentially, belonging to a certain "referential domain". A referential domain, for instance "modern cookery-books", must not be confused with a topical framework. While a framework (see above) contains a number of conventional topical possibilities, a domain contains every contribution which concern one or more of its 'member' elements. Thirdly, in table conversations gradual topic shifts occur, but also more sudden changes of the occasional type are found - which changes do not occur in discussions.

Chapter 4

The longest chapter of the book contains an exploration in the ways disagreements - that is, controversial topics - in discussions and conversations are dealt with.

4.1

The first part of the chapter contains preparatory considerations. First, the notion of disagreement is explored by comparing differences of opinion in discussions with conflicts between playing children, in which comparison the nature of the controversial topic and to the way the disagreement emerges are taken into account. Next, a distinction is made between different types of challenges, respectively concerning the propositional content, presuppositions and implications of the former utterance. Then the research questions are specified by noting a number of properties of and conditions for interaction about controversial topics: the 'difficult' nature of communication in which conflicts must be solved, the existence of norms for argumentative interaction, and the influence of the formality of the speech situation. The notion of "formal interaction around disagreements" is defined here with reference to the existence of procedures that make it possible to determine unambiguously the outcomes of the conflict. Lastly, an apparatus is proposed for the analysis and notation of prolonged disagreement interactions.

4.2

The second part of the chapter starts with describing the ways in which disagreements are 'smoothly' brought to an end. In discussions this is mostly done by modifying initial positions. When a controversial episode consists mainly of mutual modifications, one can speak of the activity type "negotiating discussion". Often, these modifications contain two parts: a dissociation is made between at the one hand a concessive part in which one agrees with parts or implications of former utterances, and at the other hand an adversative part which contains a statement that 'nevertheless' remains true. In the description of these dissociations, elements of conversation analysis (Pomerantz 1984a) and argumentation theory (Perelman 1969) are combined.

In contrast with these careful negotiations, in conversations disagreements tend to be terminated by dropping the issue altogether. This happens for instance when the challenge is not topicalized at all, or when a participant C person builds a topic-shifting utterance on a contribution in which B responded to a challenge of A. However, in the (small) corpus which was examined, it was humor by A or B that was most often used to terminate disagreements. In this way, one can break off the discussion and at the same time build new utterances on already-mentioned thematic materials. Lastly, in the table conversations one exceptional heavy debate was found, which ended in a silence and an sudden change of topic by a third speaker. The uniqueness of this instance points once again to the 'smoothness' of the other termination procedures.

When no fast termination occurs, a disagreement turns into a debate. The next part of 4.2 shows, by exemplary analyses of debate episodes from the discussions by secondary school pupils, some important construction types for oral informal debate.

An important background condition for a debate is that the antagonists operate in a 'field' of competing viewpoints. The dominance of this 'field' also means that participants understand the statements of opponents in the light of presumptions about other elements of the competing point of view. This leads them not only to challenge the opponent's statements by voicing objections, but also by formulating the contrary viewpoint and by countering assumed views of the opponent. When both sides employ this maneuver, a debate can attain a strong antithetical and repetitive character - the first construction type. Presumptions about the opponent's viewpoints can also be brought into the debate by challenging 'implications' of the opponent's utterances. By successive implicational challenges the disagreement topic gradually shifts, albeit within the topical framework that is formed by the field of competing viewpoints on an issue - the second form of debate construction. Construction types such as the two just mentioned, in which the challenging of implicated statements is essential, are seen as exemplars of the activity type "heavy debate". A third type of construction for debate episodes consists in recurring challenges of support statements, which results in the continuous emergence of new, 'embedded' disagreements. In the three debate construction types we see again several examples of topic shifts which operate on a step-by-step basis; this time we see how successive negative evaluations can 'bend' the topical line.

The second part of chapter 4 is concluded by a discussion. Firstly a systematization of the results is presented in terms of "manouvers directed towards consensus" (such as the use of humor and most dissociations) and "manouvers directed towards a change of front" (mainly implicational challenges, possibly dissociations). Further the results are tentatively related to the informality of the discussion situation. All mentioned manouvers share the property that they enable participants to avoid the explicit conclusion of a disagreement, so that it is not necessary to state exactly which viewpoints can be held up en which viewpoints must be abandoned. This is an important sense in which the interaction can be said to 'mirror' the informal traits of the discussion situation. In the pupils' discussion, the most crucial situational informality resides in the somewhat fuzzy, 'exploratory' goal of the discussion. In table conversation situation not only the goal dimension is relevant, but also the "integrity" of discussion episodes (see chapter 1) is very low. In the interaction this is shown by the fact that they 'dissolve' very easily in other verbal activities. Mostly this happens when the interaction type of "discussing a disagreement" is changed into that of a "humorous episode".

4.3

The last part of chapter 4 consists of two case studies that explore the way disagreements are brought to an end in practically motivated discussions. The first study deals with fragments of a meeting of a small group (mainly consisting of university students) that forms the organizing committee of a conference.

An important role is played here by the use of humor as a "consensus maneuver" in the final closing of controversial topics; we also find again an instance in which a third party builds an harmonic, topic-shifting continuation on an argumentative utterance. (Incidentally, it is claimed that exemplary analysis of fragments in which

these manouvers occur yields insights that go beyond the results of psychological studies in the "small group discussion" tradition.) In the discussion itself the role of compromise solutions, which prevent the emergence of a debate, is important. Here speakers display a certain 'looseness' in the sense that they dispense easily with their earlier proposals.

The second study is concerned with a discussion between a representative of the workers and one of the acting managers of a firm, on the issue of how to realize a one hour-shortening of the working-week. It is an 'informal' talk in the sense that no decision can be taken: The talk forms an intermezzo between two meetings of the works' council (ondernemingsraad), in the first of which a fundamental difference of opinion on this very issue has come to light.

In the analyses of fragments of the discussion, emphasis is laid on the abundant use by the manager of one special consensus manouever, namely the dissociation. The workers' representative more than once has to affirm the second parts of these dissociations, often formed by statements dealing with economical and organizational necessities as arguments for the position of the management. Nevertheless, he continually changes the topic and returns to his objections. It is concluded that in situations like these, it seems that no informal consensus manouvers can be successfully carried out - with emphasis on the word informal. No compromise solutions are available, no dissociations can shift the issue to a point of consensus, and the closing of the discussion can only introduced by a statement expressing hopes with regard to the results of the next meeting of the works council.

Chapter 5

5.1

In chapter 5 we turn to a very different type of informal discussion, namely the "marital problem discussion" (see chapter 1). From theses discussions, fragments of a very conflictual nature were selected for a corpus analysis: fragments in which two successive reproaches by the different spouses occur, it being clear that both partners attribute the responsibility for a relational problem to each other.

As preliminaries some observations are made with regard to the peculiar coherence that seems typical for quarrels, *cq.* conflict interactions. Here often an escalation of 'insulting' utterances is constructed by building reproaches into reactions on reproaches, while the insulting aspects gradually growing in emphasis. Next, an inquiry is made into the way mainly clinical psychologists have investigated conflict interactions. This research is to a great extent dominated by the use of coding schemes in order to produce data that can be analyzed quantitatively. This has some unfortunate consequences. The most important of them is that the sequential environment of utterances and the different ways they are related can not be taken into account in a systematic way. Further it is impossible to analyse the way controversial topics are handled, because "topic" is no unit of analysis in the coding schemes-approach. It is argued that, in order to overcome these limitations, it is necessary to follow discourse analytical approach such as the one employed in this study.

When we look to the pragmalinguistic literature on the speech act "reproach", we notice that it takes as a point of departure that a reproach opens a speech act

sequence in which only several reactions are possible as second moves, namely excuses and justifications. A second speaker (further B) who denies or issues a counterreproach is seen to be evading his sequential obligations. However, earlier research by the present author has shown that in the marital problem discussions denials and counterreproaches form the major part of the reactions. This means that we are dealing with a discourse genre for which it must be doubted if the 'speech act sequence approach' to reproaches is valid.

5.2

The second part of chapter 5 presents an overview of the several types of reactions on reproaches that can be seen as issuing a "counterreproach". The analysis is based on a corpus of 71 fragments, drawn from discussions of 24 couples. The reaction types are:

- "reversals" ('you do the same'), which are a borderline case in the sense that they may be not more than a denial of one of the felicity conditions for the first reproach
- "norm reproaches" which heavily protest against background assumptions of the first speakers' (A's) reproach
- "perception reproaches" in which B points to a perceptual deficiency that must have led A to issue his reproach, and sometimes to an explanation of this deficiency
- "counterreproaching explanations" in which B explains his conduct by referring to actions of A, that should have caused this conduct
- "incitements to solve one's own problem", in which B treats the reproach (remarkably enough) as a description of a problem of A
- "general denunciations" in which B points to characteristics or habits of A as the causes of the entire problem situation
- "referentially related reproaches" in which B merely points to a misbehavior of A in a related area. Remarkably this kind of reactions occurs almost never; for instance, utterances that can be heard as such are often re-issued later as a counterreproaching explanation.

The conclusion from this overview is that it cannot be maintained that counterreproaches are simply evading responses. The first three types mentioned can be viewed as pointing to reproach conditions that are not fulfilled. The counterreproaching explanation is simply a justification with a peculiar propositional content. Only incitements and denunciations can be seen to boldly redefine the reproach topic.

5.3

The third part of the chapter deals with A's reactions on counterreproaches.

Only in a minor part of the cases some form of harmonious continuation proves possible. Nevertheless, these cases are examined in some detail to establish which "consensus manouvers" are possibly successful in this context of rather strong disagreement.

We firstly find affirmations of the counterreproach that tend to tone down the seriousness of the affair a bit. Sometimes this lightheartedness is not accepted, which is demonstrated by B with a re-issuing of the reproach. Secondly we find

agreement by dissocation, in this case of 'reproachable' and not-reproachable parts of the conduct in question.

Thirdly, there are a few cases in which reproach interactions turn into a problem-analytical discussion of A's problems. Although one would perhaps expect otherwise, this never occurs after counterreproaches of the type "perception reproach" and "incitement to solve one's own problem". These reactions are always responded to as attributions of blame, and not as initiatives to a more analytical or constructive discussion mode. Exemplary analysis further shows that even in the few cases the transformation from reproach interaction to problem analysis does succeed, it is a rather problematical and laborious affair. One necessary condition for it to occur seems that A explicitly takes all the blame by way of a 'confession'.

Fourthly, there are cases in which a (already rather cautious) reproach interaction turns into the conversational interaction type of "discussing each others' peculiarities" or "exchanging memories".

An important conclusion of all this is: also in this context, changes in interaction types play a part in the 'production of agreement'. At the same time, it is clear that agreement is difficult to reach after two reproach utterances - considerably more difficult than after only one reproach, as earlier research indicated.

In the majority of cases the counterreproach leads to further disagreement. This happens firstly when its relevancy is (implicitly) challenged, when it is denied or when an explanation follows. Although one could conclude in these cases that B has successfully shifted the topic from the first to the second reproach, in most instances these reactions mean that A 'holds on to' the first reproach. The only exception here are a few more or less excuse-like explanations.

Secondly, a very substantial portion of opposing third moves consists in a counterreproaching explanation or in the re-issuing of the reproach. In the first case so-called "punctuation conflicts" (Watzlawick e.a. 1970) can develop. The reproach can be re-issued by pointing to a new example of a situation in which A's criticized behavior has occurred, or by slightly modifying the reproach.

The third main type of third move is the "passing-by" move, which can be recognized by two features. Firstly, it re-issues earlier reproaches or assertions without noticeable modifications. Secondly, it lacks adversative opening elements like "maar" (but) or "nou" (well) - it simply places a strongly disagreeing remark next to the former utterance, almost in the way additions are presented. Passing-by moves very often follow on utterances of the particularly 'sharp' counterreproach type of the "general denunciation", and this seems no coincidence. Finally I must mention the reaction type "disqualification", in which the counterreproach is rejected explicitly as a statement that is not to be taken seriously. The disqualification resembles the passing-by move in the sense that it does not concern itself with the content of the counterreproach, and that it tends to occur after general denunciations.

With regard to the difference between the first two and the third type of disagreeing third moves, a distinction is made between two possible interaction types in the context of prolonged disagreement. The first two types falls within the broad area of the "debate", in which the participants demonstrate, in the construction of their utterances, an attempt to 'deal with' the others' objections. The passing-by

moves demonstrate no such attempt, and exemplify a different interaction type: the "alternation of diametrically different points of view".

5.4

The main general conclusion of this exploration into the development and termination of controversial "reproach topics" is, that in this way important qualifications and additions can be made with regard to the results of psychological investigations in the field of marital interaction. Especially important is the fact that an utterance of within a certain coding scheme category (for instance many coding schemes have category named "mindreading") can occur in the context of different interaction types (debating about reproach utterances, problem analysis, alternating points of view). Further, the qualitative analysis of the consensus manouvers and interaction types that are found in the interaction of particular couples can yield insights into the interactional repertory of these couples. For instance, in the present discussion there are two couples that both show a high frequency of reproaches in their interaction, but show important differences in the sense that the interaction of the first couple shows debate, dispersed with dissociations, while the other couple mainly alternates different points of view.

Chapter 6

The last chapter starts with summarizing the results of the study with emphasis on the analytical concepts that were developed.

The main part of the chapter sets out the main elements of an empirical perspective on arguing in informal speech situations. Different contexts for arguing and several types of challenges are distinguished, and the main procedures that are used in the termination of arguments. Finally a new theme is shortly dealt with, namely the goals of arguers. A typology of possible goals of arguers is offered: topic oriented goals, persuasive goals and "demonstrative" goals - the last term refers to the situation in which an arguer aims to demonstrate his view and get others to demonstrate theirs. At the same time it is emphasized that at the present stage of research we know relatively little about the factual orientation of arguers on goals like the ones mentioned.

The chapter is concluded with two examples of directions for further research that are suggested by this study, which examples seem to be interesting not only theoretically but also from a more applied linguistic point of view. The first example concerns research into the relation between the interactional repertory of regularly meeting groups and organizational features of the group. The second suggestion concerns further research into different models of dissociation that are frequently used in different types of oral discussions, and into their argumentative validity.